DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 303 030 FL 017 664

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TITLE Dialog Journals: A Window on the Act of Language Teaching.
PUB DATE Mar 88
NOTE 26p.; Revision of a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (22nd, Chicago, IL, March 8-13, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; *English (Second Language); Higher Education; Language Teachers; Methods Courses; Practicums; *Preservice Teacher Education; Second Language Instruction; *Student Teachers; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Dialogue Journals

ABSTRACT

An adaptation of the dialog journal technique, used for teacher training purposes, is described. The journals were used as medium of communication between novice teachers of English as a second language and their supervisors in a field practicum course. Journals were studied to quantify the types of student comments made, and to track the changes in the nature of this commentary over time. Journal entries were coded for type and analyzed during the course of the field experience. The present discussion includes the rationale for implementing the technique in a methodology course or field practicum, a sample student-teacher dialogue, representative student entries for each of the categories examined, and a description of the coding process. Following a discussion of the results, the limitations of the study and the implications of using the dialogue journal technique for teacher training are addressed. (Author/MSE)

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Dialog Journals: A Window on the Act of Language Teaching

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This paper is a revised version of the paper entitled "Perceptions of Novice Teachers: Insights Gained through Dialog Journals" presented at the 22nd Annual TESOL Convention, March 1988, in Chicago, Illinois.

Dialog Journals: A Window on the Act of Language Teaching

Introduction

The dialog journal technique, in which teachers and students respond to each other's written comments, is a powerful tool for communication between the two correspondents. In both language and content courses, it allows the teacher to monitor the students' learning process, while allowing the students to engage in and reflect upon the subject matter. Dialog journals have been widely used across the curriculum as interactive "learning logs". In the field of language teaching, they have been used in native speaker composition courses at all levels, and in ESL composition courses as a means of increasing fluency and promoting student reflection on the writing process.

This paper describes an adaptation of the dialog journal technique for teacher training purposes, as an interchange between the supervisor and novice ESL teachers enrolled in a field practicum course. The study reported here represents a first attempt to quantify the types of student comments made in the journals, and to track the changing nature of this commentary over time. The paper includes a rationale for implementing the technique in a methodology course or field practium, sample student/teacher dialog, and representative student entries for each of the categories coded along with an explanation of the coding process. Following a discussion of the results, the limitations of the study and the implications of using the dialog journal technique for teacher training are addressed.

Review of the literature

Dialog journals, as defined by Staton (1983), are "interactive, functional writing which occurs between students and teachers on a daily basis, about self-generated topics of interest to each writer." At the elementary level, dialog journals enable students to share personal information, to increase their confidence in attacking writing tasks, to achieve language and cognitive development, and finally, to bridge the gap between spoken and written discourse. Dialog journals focusing on academic topics have been used at the secondary level to aid students in learning content and concepts in science, social studies, or literature courses (Atwell, 1984).

The technique has similar benefits when used with second language writers as demonstrated by Staton (1983) and Kreeft (1987), but further establishes a context for the development of language and functional communicative competence. Spack & Sadow (1983) used dialog journals in university ESL freshman composition classes in an effort to provide students the opportunity to strike a balance between expressive and expository writing.

More recently, teacher trainers have adopted dialog journals in methods and field practicum courses. Porter, et al. (1987), Mikkelsen (1985), and Irujo (1987) outline their implementation and discuss the related benefits in training ESL and bilingual teachers. As reported by these researchers, regular written exchanges between novice teacher and practicum supervisor allow the practicing teachers to reflect on the experience in the field with a knowledgeable mentor. Additionally, the

future teachers can use the journals to reflect on the discussions, lectures, and readings assigned in the methods class. The supervisor, in turn, is able to monitor and share in the student's learning experience.

Roderick (1986) offers the most systematic study of dialog writing in teacher training. She used dialog journals with pre-service elementary teachers in order to transform a teaching methodology course into a collaborative effort between the teacher supervisor and prospective teachers, while at the same time providing the pre-service teachers the opportunity to reflect on themselves as teachers and on what they learned about elementary teaching from readings, discussions, observations, and practice in the classroom. In her study of dialog journal writing, Roderick categorized the exchanges into eight themes about self, self as teacher, experiences that promoted growth as a teacher, and future goals. Additionally, the researcher compared category frequencies in first and last entries.

Context of the present study

As part of the course requirements for the M.A. degree in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) at the University of California, Los Angeles, students complete a ten-week field practicum (ESL 380K) during the spring quarter of their first year in the program. The M.A. students participating in the practicum are novice teachers, whose teaching experience is usually limited to private tutoring or less than two years of actual classroom experience. The course is a practical one, with emphasis on the classroom

teaching/learning experience. To complete the course, students are required to:

1) attend weekly class meetings taught by the course supervisor
2) spend 40 hours in the field, under the supervision of a master teacher
3) teach a minimum of eight lessons, as agreed upon by the master teacher and supervisor
4) keep a log or journal of the 380K experience
5) be observed two to three times by the course supervisor
6) be videotaped giving a mini-lesson and
7) meet with the supervisor to discuss the observations and the field practicum experience

For the practicum, the novice teachers are placed in local adult education programs or other programs (e.g., intensive language institutes) with a similar student population. The master teacher on site is the main source of ideas and guidance, with the 380K supervisor serving in a more administrative and evaluative capacity. In addition to observing the master teacher and teaching the required number of lessons, the novice teachers perform a variety of other tasks, such as working with small groups, assisting individual students, responding to student homework, and helping to plan lessons in conjunction with the master teacher. Successful completion of 380K and the California Basic Educational Skills Test (CBEST) allows the course participants to apply for the California Adult Educational Credential in TESL.

As noted above, one of the requirements for completing 380K has been for the course participants to keep a running log of the impressions of the field experience, lesson plans, materials used, etc. Traditionally, this journal has been handed in at the end of the quarter. However, in an attempt to establish better contact between the

supervisor and the course participants, the dialog journal technique was piloted during the spring quarter of 1986. In the pilot, participants were asked to comment freely on any issues of interest to them concerning the practicum experience, and to submit the journal entries to the supervisor on a weekly basis. The supervisor, in turn, responded to the participants' journal entries, giving opinions where elicited and in general writing down her own impressions. Based on feedback from the participants and the teacher involved, the pilot was determined to be a successful one, and the dialog journal technique was again implemented in the following year's course offering. Appendix A gives a sample interchange of student/teacher dialog.

Rationale for using dialog journals

In the present study, the 380K participants met formally with the course supervisor only once a week, and were dispersed for their actual field placement throughout the Los Angeles area. Thus, the primary impetus for using the dialog journal format was to establish more systematic communication between the two parties. This quantitative enhancement of interchange between the supervisor and the novice teacher provides a major rationale in itself for the use of dialog journals as a teacher training tool, since it allows the supervisor, in a limited way, to be present in the classrooms of all the novice teachers and to better understand the daily context they find themselves in.

However, there are a number of other more qualitative reasons which can be cited in support of this technique. First, the dialog journals provide a form of scaffolding for the novice teachers in that

the supervisor, by virtue of her experience, can help the student teacher make sense of both the negative and positive experiences of the practicum. Consequently, the participants are provided with a non-threatening way of talking about problems, and develop a more trusting relationship with the supervisor. In a sense, the written exchanges between the two parties are more of a peer interaction than the teacher/student relationship found in more traditional classes, since both parties can comment on positive and negative aspects of their own teaching, admitting failures and rejoicing over successes. Second, the comments help to make the field practicum a more collaborative effort, since the issues raised by individual novice teachers in many ways *become* the content matter of the weekly meetings between the supervisor and the students in the field. Third, the use of dialog journals helps to redefine the role of the supervisor vis-a-vis the master teachers and student teachers in that it allows the supervisor to foresee potential areas of conflict between the student and master teacher and, in many cases, intercede in advance to ward off problems. Finally, the dialog journals serve as a vehicle to engender introspective tendencies in the student teachers. They thus promote highly reflective writing on the participants' emerging talents and techniques, and provide affirmation and encouragement on the emerging craft of teaching.

The Present Study

Subjects: 20 graduate students enrolled in ESL 380K during Spring Quarter 1987 kept a weekly journal of experiences in their field

placement site. Five of the 20 students were non-native speakers of English.

Field Practicum Site: The practicing teachers were placed in adult education classrooms at one of three locations: 1) an evening series of language courses offered on campus through UCLA's Extension Division (Site 1), with students of mixed ethnicity and a relatively high socio-economic status (SES); 2) an evening community adult education program in downtown Los Angeles with a largely Hispanic, low SES population (Site 2); and 3) a community college program on the westside of Los Angeles offering daytime and evening classes for students of mixed ethnicity and SES (Site 3). Student teachers were placed in courses of either beginning or intermediate proficiency levels.

Data: The data analyzed for this study were taken from two main sources: 1) the student journal entries themselves and 2) a retrospective questionnaire soliciting evaluation of all course components sent out to former 380K students who had participated in the dialog journal writing.

Procedures: Throughout the quarter, the participants submitted dialog journal entries to the supervisor, who responded to the comments and returned the journals in an ongoing dialog format. At the end of the ten-week period, the supervisor collected the completed journals. The researchers then studied the journals to find themes that emerged repeatedly in order to establish a coding system. The entries fell into the following nine categories, with the subcategories as noted:

> 1) STUDENT POPULATION: students' age, language background, ethnic mix, educational and proficiency level, expectations, and motivation

2) INSTRUCTIONAL SETTING: type of program (i.e., adult school, intensive language institute), administrative policy, class size, socio-economic setting
3) CURRICULUM & METHODOLOGY: program objectives, philosophies, and methodologies, including the time frame for achieving the above
4) METHODS AND ACTIVITIES: group work, role plays, drilling, etc.
5) TECHNIQUES: correction, modelling, classroom management, L1 use, and teacher's adjustment of input, register and complexity
6) MATERIAL: use of print medium, realia, and visuals, availability of resource materials, teacher-developed materials, and the match of the above with student needs
7) ROLE OF THE TEACHER: problems dealing with multiple proficiency levels and differing paces of learning within a class, struggle to identify the comfortable and appropriate role to adapt, importance of setting clear expectations, the need to define a border between challenging students to find their own linguistic resources and assisting (or "rescuing") them when in need; and the general nature of assessment and feedback
8) LESSON ORGANIZATION: pacing, timing, recycling of material variety of activities, and transitions between activities
9) AWARENESS OF SELF: presence/absence of self- confidence, language proficiency (with non-native teachers), and comments about peer observations, observations by the supervisor, and videotaped lessons.

All journals were coded for the total number of comments falling into the nine thematic categories. The ten-week journal keeping experience was then blocked into three periods of 3 1/2 weeks each in order for the researchers to record category frequency, not only at the beginning and end as Roderick (1984) did, but in a consistent manner throughout the ten weeks to measure change in the kind and content of student comments. Further, the supervisor-novice teacher exchange was examined for the following variables: language status (native vs. non-native), site, and level.

The retrospective questionnaire: This 12-item questionnaire, which asked students to rate the various components of 380K on a 5-point Likert scale and write an open-ended evaluative comment on each of

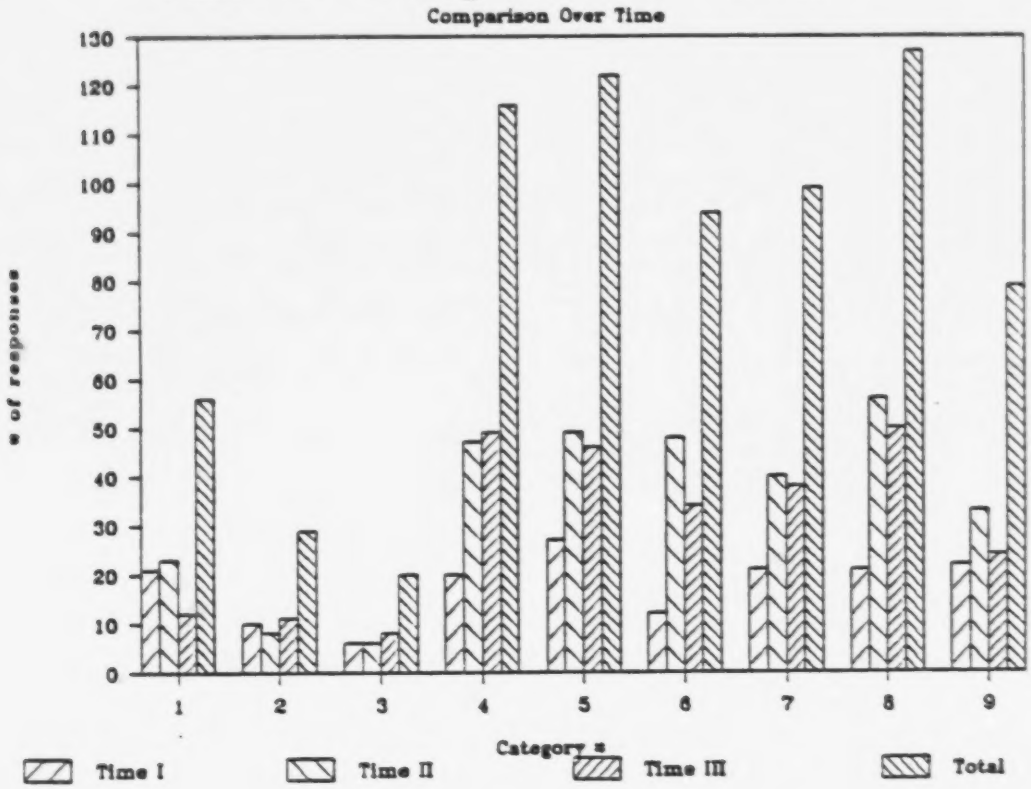
these components, was distributed to 18 of the former 380K participants. Respondents were asked to evaluate the usefulness of all 380K course requirements including dialog journals, class discussions, observations (both video observations and other supervisor and peer observations), observation/feedback sessions, recommended readings, and guest presentations.

Results and Discussion

Comparison of Comments Over Time

Table 1 presents the numbers of student entries in each category by time period. Of the nine categories, 1-3 (56, 29, and 20 comments respectively) appear to be the least productive in eliciting student comment, while categories 4, 5, and 8 are the most productive, with 116, 122, and 127 total comments respectively. These trends appear particularly true when viewed over time; category 1 (student population) decreases rather sharply in the third time period, as do the more productive categories 6 (materials) and 9 (awareness of self). In contrast, categories 4-5 (methods & activities and techniques) and 7-8 (role of the teacher and lesson organization) exhibit a marked increase from period one to two.

Table 1: Dialog Journal Entries --



These results confirm the researchers' initial impressions--namely, that in this first teaching experience, the novices tended to focus on the assigned classroom, students, and work of the master teacher, along with the day-to-day mechanics of lesson preparation and presentation. They did not, on the other hand, comment frequently on the instructional setting or on the curriculum/methodology since this mandated looking beyond the individual classroom to the macro-level context, i.e., to administrative decisions that affected the classroom.

As noted above, the number of overall comments on student population decreased over time. In the first weeks of the practicum, the student teachers tended to comment on the obvious--the students,

their backgrounds, and reasons for taking the class. Gradually, as the students and the setting became more familiar, the journal entries began to focus on the students as learners, responding to materials, correction, and teaching techniques.

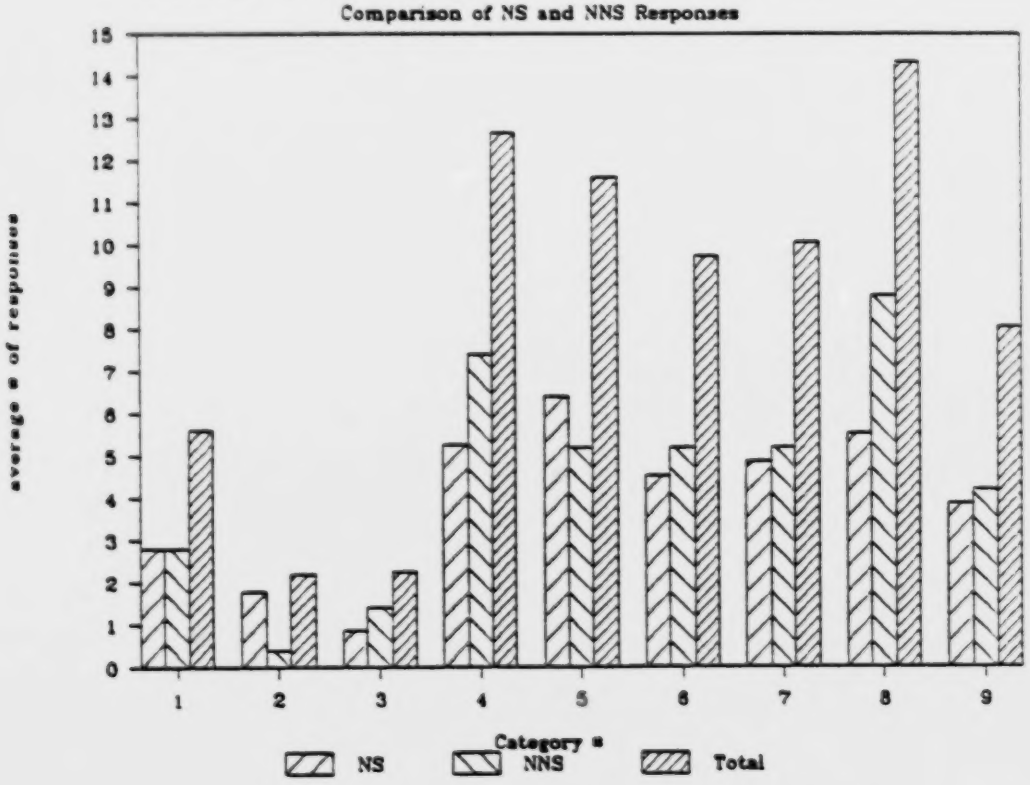
Similarly, student comments on materials increased markedly in the second period as the the novice teachers began to actually teach some parts of the lesson rather than just observe. Through their own teaching experiences and through observations of the successful and unsuccessful use of materials by their master teachers or peers, they gained an increased understanding of the connection between effective teaching and well-prepared materials. In period 3, this attention to materials dropped off as comments focussed more on techniques, methods, activities, and lesson organization. Ostensibly, students had become aware that even the best materials when badly used have little intrinsic value.

Regarding categories 4 (methods and activities), 5 (techniques), 7 (role of the teacher) and 8 (lesson organization), all of which increased over time, it should be noted that all four of these categories have to do with the craft of teaching. At this beginning stage of teaching, the focus is necessarily on the mechanics of presentation, the teacher's role, and on engineering student's language learning and practice. The ten weeks spent observing and discussing successful and unsuccessful techniques, activities, and lesson organization is clearly reflected in these entries. As one student [LK] commented, "You have to learn to play the scales before you can play the sonatas."

Comparison of NS and NNS Entries

Overall, as displayed in Table 2, the native speaking (NS) and non-native speaking (NNS) participants were similar in their commenting behavior. There was no marked difference between the NS (n=15) and NNS (n=5) participants in terms of the total mean number of comments made (35.9 vs. 40.6 respectively), nor was there any difference in the focus of comments over time between the two sets of subjects. However, the NNSs made noticeably fewer comments in categories 2 (x = 0.4) and 5 (x = 5.2) than their NS counterparts (x = 1.8 and 6.4 respectively), and more comments in categories 3, 4, and 8 (x = 1.4, 7.4, and 8.8) than the NSs (x = 0.9, 5.3, and 5.5).

Table 2: Dialog Journal Entries --



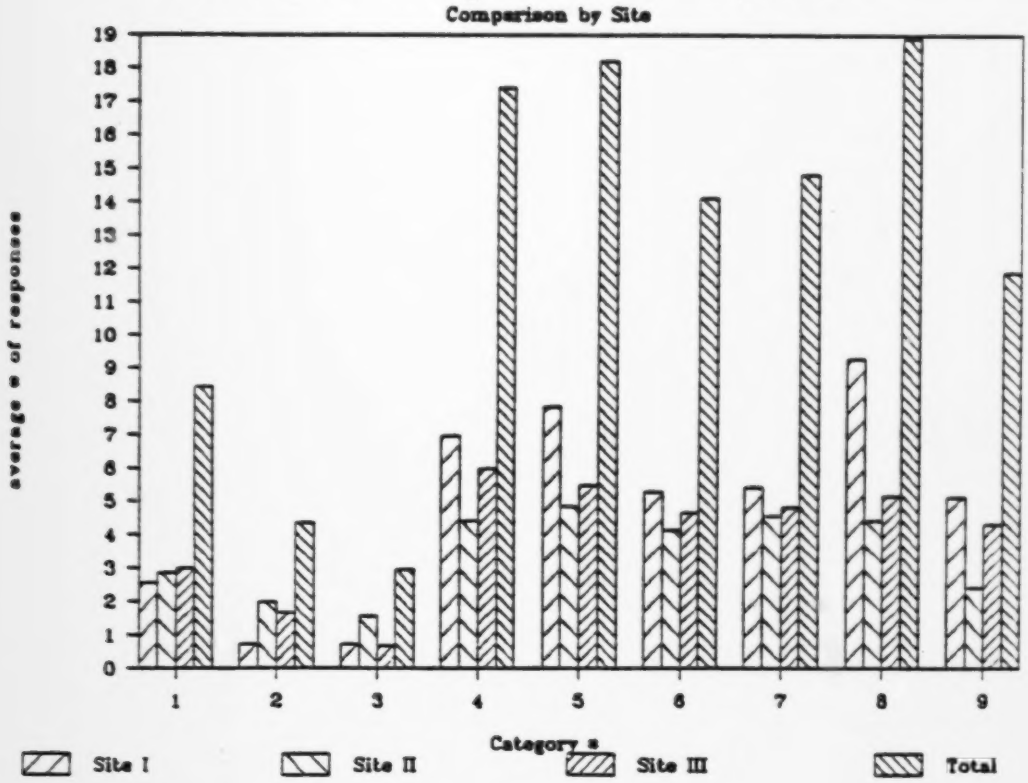
The smaller number of comments by the NNSs in category 2 (instructional setting) is attributable to the fact that all but one of the NNS student teachers were placed in Site 1, an ESL program conducted through the university's Extension Division which was more academic in nature than the other two sites. The student teachers' familiarity with this setting and the student population in all likelihood made it unnecessary for them to comment on the instructional setting. Another possible reason for the lower number of comments is that the field placement site these NNSs found themselves in was quite different from that they would encounter in their own countries, and therefore lacked relevance to them in their future teaching situation.

As evidenced by the larger number of comments by NNSs in category 4 (methods & activities), the NNS novice teachers used the dialog journals as a chance to focus on their own lesson preparation, presentation, and classroom predicaments. Their entries show a greater attention to the basic building blocks of good teaching. Increased descriptions of lesson plans organization can be attributed to a lack of confidence in their English language and teaching abilities. This same lack of confidence is most likely responsible for the lower level of NNS comment about Category 5 (techniques) since they probably did not feel qualified enough to handle such issues as correction, modeling, and classroom management with confidence.

Comparison of Journal Entries by Setting

As for the variable of setting, a number of differences emerge. As seen in Table 3, the subjects who were situated at Site 2 (the adult school) made the least number of mean comments (x = 31.3 vs. 35.8 at Site 3 and 44.0 at Site 1) in their journals, especially concerning categories 4 and 9. Subjects at Site 1 (the Extension Division Program), on the other hand, commented quite freely, especially in categories 5 and 8, yet they made fewer comments in category 2 (instructional setting) than did the other participants.

Table 3: Dialog Journal Entries --



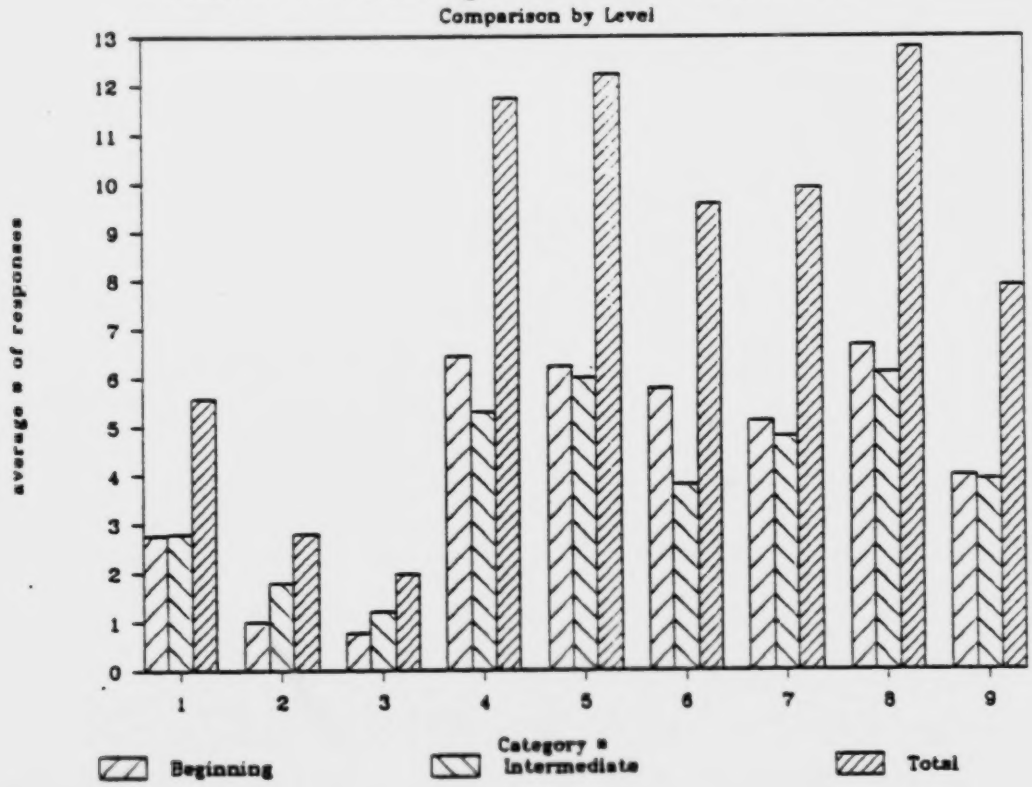
Given the variety of setting in which the novice teachers were placed, the differences which emerged with respect to this variable are to be expected. Regarding the overall number of comments made by the various participants, it should be mentioned that, for logistical reasons, the Site 2 students worked independently of a master teacher. Thus they not only carried a full load of graduate classes at UCLA but also assumed full instructional responsibility for classes four nights a week. This fact, coupled with a 60-minute rush hour commute to the downtown site, helps to explain the lack of in-depth commentary about the teaching experience in the journals of these participants.

The focus of the students' comments also varied according to setting. The Site 2 teachers, provided with little support in the form of established curricular guidelines, supervision, or adequate textbooks, were preoccupied in their comments with such issues as meeting the needs of students with varied proficiency levels and paces of learning, or with the impact of the program's "revolving door" policy on class size, student attendance, and level of motivation. Preoccupied with the administrative issues endemic to their site, these teachers did not comment as freely in categories 4 (methods and activities) and 9 (awareness of self) as did the teachers in Site 1, who were stimulated by the guidance of cooperative and interested master teachers to think and comment more generally about their overall practicum experience.

Comparison of Journal Entries by Level

The only noticeable difference which emerges regarding the variable of level (beginning vs. intermediate) as displayed in Table 4 is to be found in category 6 (materials), with the beginning level teachers making a mean of 5.8 comments to the intermediate teachers' 3.8.

Table 4: Dialog Journal Entries --

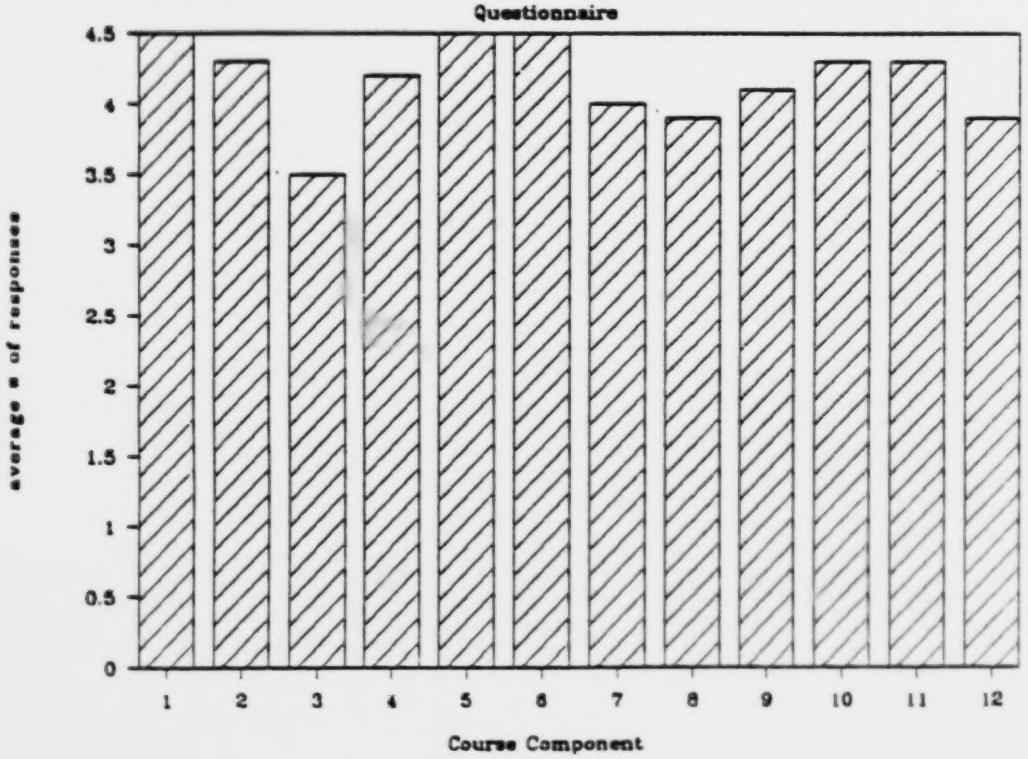


One possible explanation for the beginning level teachers' preoccupation with materials is their ostensible disappointment with the quality of the available beginning-level materials and texts.

The Retrospective Questionnaire

Of the 18 questionnaires distributed, 12 were returned, representing a return rate of 66%. As evidenced by Table 5, both receiving dialog journal responses from the supervisor and writing dialog journal entries received high ratings from the student participants (x = 4.5 and 4.3 respectively), ranking in top place among the various components of the practicum.

Table 5: Results of the Retrospective Questionnaire



Along with the open-ended comments received in the student questionnaires, these results indicate that the dialog journal was indeed viewed as a valuable component of the practicum, ranking along with the

more traditional components of the practicum such as observations by the supervisor, the subsequent feedback sessions, and viewing one's teaching on video.

Limitations of the study

The above-reported study represents a preliminary attempt to investigate the insights of novice teachers. As such, it has a number of limitations. First, although the researchers looked at the student comments *quantitatively*, and coded comments by number of occurrences, there was no attempt made to assess the comments *qualitatively*. In other words, a one-sentence comment on a given topic (say student population) was coded the same as lengthier discourse on the same subject. Second, although it represents the researchers' best attempt to group like comments into categories, the coding system itself is subject to question. In retrospect, the researchers felt that an additional category, "Student Responses and Reactions" was needed, and that there was need for further refinement of the coding system in order to avoid the overlaps between categories which occurred. Third, although the researchers normed themselves on representative student journal entries, there was no attempt to compute inter-rater reliability. Finally, since the course itself was graded on a P/NP basis, and the dialog journal component was only one of numerous course components required for successful completion, there was a large degree of variation in the quality of the student journal entries, and in the degree to which students took the assignment seriously; thus the validity of the

student comments must be questioned accordingly. As one student reported in the retrospective questionnaire: "In all fairness, I didn't take the assignment all that seriously. I was much more wrapped up in teaching, observations, etc. I usually wrote something that would make me look good rather than something that would express the true mess that was."

Conclusions/implications

Despite the above limitations, the results of this study are encouraging, and make a convincing case for the use of dialog journals as a teacher training tool. The value of dialog journals may lie more on the teacher trainer's side than on the student's side, since they permit the trainer to stay in constant contact with the student's training experience, and to gain insights he or she might not otherwise have had access to. However, from the student standpoint, the journals offer the chance to voice doubts and opinions, vent emotions, introspect on what has happened in the classroom, ask for assistance, and finally record teaching ideas for the future. If the students are willing to be sometimes painfully honest about the practicum experience, the dialog journal can engender the reflective process necessary to challenge students to hone their teaching craft.

As for suggested improvements in the technique, students in the open-ended section of the retrospective questionnaire concurred that more structure in the journal entries was desireable, along with a better initial definition of the expectations and parameters of the assignment.

Perhaps after the third week of the practicum, the supervisor could assign individualized topics based on the students' needs and interests. This would allow the supervisor to scaffold the novices' experiences while providing them with a place to begin the week's journal entry other than the blank page.

The study itself was effective in establishing variables and categories that concern the teaching act and context. Unlike the study by Roderick (1986) which examined student teacher dialog journal entries concerning the self as teacher, this study is a preliminary attempt to understand how novice teachers marshall all they know about linguistic and educational research, language teaching methods and techniques, and cultural and curricular issues, apply this knowledge to their practicum situation, and evaluate their own performance.

The present research also indicates that while novice teachers are concerned with defining themselves as teachers, they are more preoccupied with understanding their own classroom, learning from their master teacher, and in the final analysis, mastering the art of teaching language.

APPENDIX A

Sample Student Teacher/Supervisor Dialog

STUDENT TEACHER ENTRY #1

Today I just observed. Instead of noticing [master teacher's] teaching techniques, I found myself focused on the students and their errors. I suspect this is a hold-over from [TESL class on structure of English] where we focused on identifying grammar errors.

I noticed four interesting errors...Last week two of the girls showed me a thin book and asked what was the opposite of "thin". I told them "thick". Today, in describing an overweight girl, one of them said, "The thick girl"...I wonder if that was a "teacher-induced error" on my part because I failed to explain the environments that we use "thick" in.

Some students are really struggling with over-generalizing the third-person singular. They know that an "s" goes somewhere, so they stick it in the sentence wherever, hoping that they are correct! I heard "My brother look likes to me" instead of "My brother looks like me" and "I wants..."

In glancing at a students' notebook, I saw that he had carefully written down a number of survival skill type phrases. One phrase was "Do you accept my check?" I tried to picture the scene he might encounter with a store clerk when he uses that phrase. The abrupt sound of this question (which would easily be softened by the use of a modal) may cause the clerk to respond curtly--or at least, a bit defensively. It brought to mind the movie "Cross Talk".

Finally, I noticed that the students found it difficult to detect their own errors. [Master teacher] gave them a dictation. Afterwards, she passed out a copy of the dictation and had each student correct his own paper. The Asian students, who left out many of the articles in the dictation, also did not catch these errors when they checked their work. It is a curious thing...(sorry to get poetic!) this ability to block out both the hearing (during the dictation) and seeing (during the correction) of the article. I'm wondering if this demonstrates a form of interference from L1, or just illustrates that it's difficult to produce obligatory items in L2 when they are not present in L1.

STUDENT TEACHER ENTRY #2

My second teaching experience...though I was less nervous and more aware of some aspects that I didn't notice my first time, I still have to start at ground zero and build my ability to "know" the class--their feelings and responses--and then teach accordingly. This is not yet my "element"!

Today I went over the contrast between the simple present and the present progressive. I used an exercise that I found in *Side by Side* (Molinsky & Bliss). This was a review for them, as [master

teacher] had already gone over the forms in a previous exercise. (My lesson is attached.)

My major weakness this time was not providing enough of a model before I had the students work in pairs. They floundered for a while not knowing exactly what to do. (I also hopped right into the new vocabulary without giving it a context--I should have tackled each new word as it came up in the exercise, rather than out of context at the beginning.

I also found myself going way over my time limits. I do not yet have a "feel" for how to predict how much time each activity will take.

In order to fulfill my extra hours and to see the balance of the entire program at [site 1], I sat in on the afternoon teacher's class. He teaches Reading & Conversation, whereas [master teacher] teaches Grammar & Writing. I was most impressed with the amount of questions he asked in helping the students comprehend the story.--Many vocabulary items I would have taken for granted that they knew, especially the phrasal verbs--but it was exactly these items which seemed to cause the most problems.

SUPERVISOR RESPONSE:

KC-

I really enjoyed your remarks on the student error patterns you are observing. You're probably right that [the structure class] helped you focus in on this aspect of the classroom: I still find years later that courses I took in the program did give me insights (even though I may not have valued the course at the time). I especially liked the comment on "Do you accept my check". Crosstalk is a pretty amazing video for sensitizing us all to these kind of reactions (which I don't think ESL teachers are immune to)!

I agree with [master teacher] (and you) with the need for modeling--both teacher modeling and modeling by a peer. You used both of these in your lesson I observed quite successfully, as we can discuss. Developing a feel for the pacing of the lesson isn't quite as easily learned a technique, though as you point out it's a really crucial skill to develop. This is one of the most classic weaknesses I find in observing novice teachers--either they rush through the presentation and don't exploit the language they are presenting adequately, or their lessons drag because they spend too much time on individual activities when they should be picking up the pace or varying the activity. Sorry I don't have a really easy answer for how to remedy this, but it comes with time and experience. I think being videotaped can really help to point this out, as I've certainly noticed it when watching myself on video.

Bring your comments on "losing" students with the level of language you address them with into class on Friday, as I do want to discuss this issue a bit. Also see if you can put your finger on what it is [master teacher] does to communicate at the level of the students.

Simplification of vocabulary? Rate of speech? Avoidance of idioms? Structures? At what point does this type of thing cease to be useful in the sense of providing students with "comprehensible input" and border on teacherese?

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